

John “Jack” Coulter, FBI Counterintelligence Agent, New York City Bureau, NY

(Father of right wing columnist Ann Coulter)

Interviewed by Jonathan Rosenblum, April 22, 1990, Harvard Club, New York, for book, **Copper Crucible: How the Arizona Miners’ Strike of 1983-1985 Recast Labor Management Relations in America (Cornell University Press)**

Excerpt on the investigation and capture of Rudolf Abel begins at 1 min. 28 seconds of this recording.

[Feel free to post notes about anything that seems or sounds mis-transcribed as you listen along. The voice posing questions is the author. This is a rough draft.]

Coulter:

I spent nine years with the FBI and was [based] here in New York. I had two kids. I decided I wanted to get out of the government service and go into private industry. Started a search and wound up working for Phelps Dodge [copper mining and smelting corporation] as an attorney [and later vice president].

I worked on the counterespionage squad.

Oh yeah, it was what they called Section One. It was the premier squad in New York. I worked on the Abel case. And another guy you probably never heard of, before your time... a big news item, [was a] guy named William Walter Remington, a Dartmouth graduate who was in the Bentley [spy] ring. He was like a junior Alger Hiss.

What was the Colonel col Abel case?

Colonel Abel was probably the number one Russian espionage agent we ever got in this country. Living over in Brooklyn.

He came into this country ten- fifteen years before. Was operating a photography shop in Brooklyn and had a whole ring of agents in New York City. He was the guy we traded for Francis Gary Powers, the U2 pilot.

Wild Bill Donovan made the exchange on the bridge between East and West Germany. [Note: Historical clarification: “James” Donovan made the exchange.]

I was a lawyer. I was a street agent.

[Question: “Any anecdotes you’re allowed to tell?:]

I belong to the “Ex Agents” and they just sent out a notice to everyone to be careful when talking to people about security things.

One of funny things in Abel. ...There were two cases going on Abel at the time.

One was a nickel picked up by newsboy in Brooklyn. Newsboy flipped it on ground. And the nickel came open and there were two pieces and there was a piece of microfilm in it.

The Bureau was trying to find out what it was. It obviously was microfilm. It had a code on it. I got out in ‘59 so [it was] probably around ‘54 or 55. The [FBI] cryptanalysis section couldn’t break the code.

But another guy, another agent had an informant [who] came in off the street and wanted to talk to someone. Turned out to be another colonel. Abel was a colonel in Russian espionage. This Colonel Hayhanen came in ...we were told he was a colonel in Russian intelligence. Working in NYC and wanted to defect.

Able was someone he worked for...though not supposed to ever be seeing him, he did see him one time [two years earlier]. Where he hid a Espionage agents have what they call signal zones and drop zones. For example they may put a thumbtack on the back of park bench. Another agent, the guy that's running him, sees it. Puts hand along there and that means something in the drop area. Hayhanen put a signal, made a drop.

Left the signal and then he walks. Guy turned out to be Abel came along. [Hayhanen had] seen him. Matter of fact, he said, I can prove that that's true. I'll take you over to Prospect Park in Brooklyn. When I went back to this area 15 minutes later to see my drop, which was a hollowed out bolt, with microfilm in it, they were cementing over that sidewalk. He said, I'm sure it's still in there. So all the agents went to check that part of sidewalk. And it was there. It was there.

Took a lot of doing. Then eventually, coming up with Abel. But he never broke. There were so many things about him about that attorneys never knew to focus on... Then he went back to Russia, went back to Moscow.

My recollection was ... I'm getting a little foggy now. I wasn't involved in the arrest.... They picked up a lot of things that he had [from Abel] . He was an expert in microdots, you know. Put this thing in and a microfilm under ... that period. It was that small. They picked up all kinds of paraphernalia that he used. It was real, movie type stuff. Cufflinks and hollowed out bolts. Nickel. The nickel was good. I think the nickel is still on exhibit in headquarters in Washington. You could take that thing and drop it in street today and it wouldn't come apart like it did that day.

A newsboy picked it up. No one ever figured that out [the newsboy picked it up] .

... I liked I enjoyed the Bureau. I was probably not going to stay in. The pay wasn't that good. I lived in Manhattan. Had two kids.

I had a campaign going to get a job [outside the FBI]and three companies were talking to me at the same time. Phelps [Dodge] was the best because I was going into their legal department as an attorney and there were only two others attorneys working there....